

**Rio Grande NF Forest Plan Revision
Recreation Meeting #3
June 23, 2015
Conejos Canyon, CO
Meeting Summary**

Attendees

Forest Plan Revision Team

- *US Forest Service:* Adam Mendonca, Erin Minks, Andrea Jones, Tony Lucero, Henry Eichman
- *Peak Facilitation:* Heather Bergman, Katie Waller

Approximately 25 members of the public were present.

Meeting Overview

The U.S. Forest Service (USFS) recently began revising the forest plan for the Rio Grande National Forest (RGNF). Members of the public attended this second of four recreation meetings held in the San Luis Valley to discuss recreation on the RGNF. Information gathered from this discussion will help inform the initial assessment phase of the forest plan revision process.

Forest Plan and Revision Process

Adam Mendonca, Deputy Forest Supervisor of the Rio Grande National Forest, introduced himself as the USFS employee primarily responsible for the forest plan revision. Mr. Mendonca explained that the forest plan guides every activity on the forest and is typically revised every 15-20 years. The last forest plan for the Rio Grande was finalized in 1996; the process of revising the plan recently began under the guidance of the updated 2012 planning rule. The revision consists of three steps: a year-long assessment phase, a two-year National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) phase, and finally a monitoring phase.

Rather than creating an entirely new plan, Mr. Mendonca explained that the plan revision aims to revise the current forest plan by first identifying which aspects need to be changed and which aspects are working well. USFS is currently seeking public input to help inform this need for change determination; this meeting focuses on input about recreational resources. In addition to sharing input at this meeting, members of the public are strongly encouraged to stay involved throughout the four-year plan revision process in order to help structure the best possible forest plan.

Mr. Mendonca noted that since the last forest plan was created, changes to factors like forest health, technology, forest uses, economics, and wildfire regimes have impacted the forest and could potentially affect recreational opportunities and management. Mr. Mendonca stressed the importance of participating in the plan revision and noted that giving input at meetings is not the only way to participate in the plan revision process. Members of the public also can provide input by email at comments-rocky-mountain-rio-grande@fs.fed.us, on the interactive plan revision web site at <http://riograndeplanning.mindmixer.com>, or by sending mail to or stopping by the office at 1803 W. Highway 160, Monte Vista, CO 81144.

Community Discussion

Participants broke into small groups to discuss three topics: recreation assessment questions; forest plan standards and guidelines; and recreation in specific areas of the forest. A summary of key themes from the discussions follows.

RECREATION ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

What types of recreation are important on the Rio Grande National Forest?

Motorized and Mechanized Recreation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Snowmobiling • Adventure and long-distance motorcycle riding • ATV and UTVing • Cumbres – Toltec Railroad • Woodcutting using mechanized tools
Non-Motorized Recreation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Archery • Hiking • Trail running • Camping • Backpacking • Fishing • Bird watching • Mountain biking • Hunting • Rock climbing • Kayaking • Rafting • Horseback riding • Wildlife, nature, and cultural viewing • Woodcutting using non-mechanized tools • Relaxing • Mushrooming • Photography
Winter Recreation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Snowshoeing • Snowmobiling • Skiing • Ice climbing • Cross-country skiing • Sledding • Tubing • Snowplay

How are different types of recreation compatible or conflicting?

Conflicting Uses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-motorized users want quiet. • Mountain bikers and dirt bikers can conflict. • Snowmobiles conflict with many user types because of noise and terrain damage. • Skiers conflict with motorized users. • Motorcycles damage hills that other users enjoy.
Compatible Uses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mountain bikers and dirt bikers want similar opportunities. • Many user types want longer trails.
General Comments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All uses conflict at times. • Users are becoming more specialized. • ATV users want longer trails. • Voluntary separation does not work.

What draws people to the RGNF from distant places? Are there recreation opportunities unique to the RGNF?

Recreational Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Backpacking • Snowmobiling • Hunting • Skiing and snowshoeing at yurts • Solitude and privacy
Management Prescriptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allow new recreational access with caveats in USFS standards and guidelines. • Manage for new recreational opportunities that will increase visitation.
General Comments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledge users outside San Luis Valley, such as those from Albuquerque. • Newer generation wants to kayak and float the Conejos River.

What opportunities are there to enhance or expand recreational opportunities to meet current or future demands? What trends may affect future demands for recreation, including emerging new or unique recreational interests?

Activities That May Expand	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mountain biking • Hiking • Skiing • Birding • Fly fishing • Bow hunting
Management Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider sustainability and user conflict issues with ATVs. • Consider damage to natural resources from motorized overuse, such as erosion and water pooling. • Clarify access issues, especially regarding kayaking and boating. • Encourage respect for the land with growing recreation. • Replace signage when it falls down or is removed. • Improve trail maintenance efforts. • Encourage out-of-town visitors to take advantage of a variety of area opportunities. • Use QR codes to direct visitors to other attractions in the area. • Increase access for low-impact uses like hiking and mountain biking. • Make guiding and outfitting permits more inclusive. • Open more public lands as secluded nature of the forest will draw more visitors. • Utilize volunteers to maintain trails. • Allow chainsaws in wilderness areas to encourage most efficient trail maintenance. • Expand yurt usage to more seasons.
Current Conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Signage is missing from Red Lake to Dipping Lakes Trail. • Camp Lake jeep trails are not apparent and need to be examined. • Trail closures are hard to find on USFS website. • Rubilee Trail needs better trail maintenance.
General Comments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fishing increases visitors from Texas. • Overall hunting is decreasing. • Outfitters keep trails clear. • People maintain trails by themselves, currently.

Are there issues or dynamics that may prevent or preclude minorities and other underrepresented groups from seeking, accessing, or participating in recreational activities on the Forest? What opportunities are there to foster greater connection between people and nature through education, experience, recreation, and stewardship?

Underrepresented Communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor communities have less access than others. • Poor communities may not know about the available opportunities or have the equipment to access them. • Main forest uses are sustenance, such as wood gathering and hunting. • Hispanic communities have not participated much in the revision process. • Local children do not know the resources around them. • Handicap access for wheelchairs is not sufficient for recreation, such as fishing.
Increased Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordinate with local schools, youth groups, and other local organizations. • Consider an “adopt-a-trail” program.

How does recreation on the RGNF contribute to social, economic, and ecological sustainability? What trends are influencing the demand for various types of recreation activities (such as changing population demographics, traditional uses, or income levels)?

Economic Sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • San Luis Valley (SLV) economy is completely dependent on the RGNF. • Mountains are the largest attraction bringing visitors to the area. • Local businesses collapse if the forest collapses, as seen after past fire. • Residents fear another large fire and its impacts on local communities. • Aquifer is important to agriculture and the forest supports the aquifer. • Hunting is declining with younger generations.
Social Sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People use the forest to collect wood, picnic, and hunt. • Forest is culturally important for rural communities. • Residents choose to live in SLV because of the RGNF. • Forest is important for social sustainability. • Overcrowding of the forest will change the culture and feel of the SLV.
Ecological Sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recreation and ecological sustainability go hand-in-hand. • Education about impacts of recreation is imperative for long-term forest health. • Short-term users do not see the enduring impacts of recreation and other human activities.

FOREST PLAN STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES

Standards and guidelines are the “rules of the forest” that are documented in a forest plan. Standards are requirements; they are things the Forest Service *must* do. Guidelines are things the Forest Service can or should do. During this meeting, participants reviewed and discussed several standards and guidelines that are in the current forest plan. Forest Service staff identified these standards and guidelines for discussion due to confusion regarding their meaning, difficulty implementing them, and/or changed context on the ground. Participants were invited to provide feedback about whether the standards and guidelines are working, whether they should be changed from standards to guidelines or vice versa, and whether they should be deleted altogether.

Use concessionaire operations whenever possible.

Do Not Change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concessionaires keep the area clean.
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Guideline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They are a good source of information for visitors. • Local concessionaire operations are beneficial. • They are beneficial when doing what the USFS is not able to do.
Change Guideline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paperwork for becoming a concessionaire is difficult. • Operations are not available during hunting season. • Locals do not use these operations due to high cost. • Day use is expensive. • More regulation is necessary to benefit the public. • Toilets are not accessible unless one pays.
Hunting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Operations are not available during hunting season. • Hunters bring extra people as outfitters and guides.
Management Options	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer incentives to keep concessionaire operations local. • Open operations during hunting season. • Use concessionaire operations in high-traffic sites. • Create a reporting mechanism for reporting problems with concessionaires. • Use resident pricing or forgiveness, like with hunting. • Allow dog walking in these areas during off season.
General Comments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Operations have good and bad characteristics. • Some concessionaire operations are closed. Please offer explanation. • Concessionaire operations are underused. • Consistent use of bear proof trash containers at USFS and concessionaire campgrounds is important. • Concessionaire hosts can be abrasive. • Rules are strict even when they are not full. • Some concessionaires are too stringent in rule application, e.g., requiring fee for picnics

Camping will be limited to 14 days in a 30-day period.

Change Standard	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Change so it no longer negatively impacts people who need more time, such as bow hunters. • Change the guideline to allow for moving of camps after 14 days. • Change it to a standard. • Adjust time frame for different types of users. • Allow users to stay unless there is a specific need to move on.
General Comments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This standard is not enforced. • Young people are living on the forest. • This standard seems harsh. • Research should be excluded or made an exception. • This standard limits use of the forest by one group, allowing for more diversity in users.

Game retrieval using ATVs is authorized between 12:00 pm and 5:00 pm each day, unless soil and water damage will occur.

Change Standard	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include a distance limit. • Find a way to limit disruptions to other users. • Limit where this practice is allowed.
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Place size limits on ATVs. Clarify which types of game this practice affects. Define size of ATVs. Clarify wording. Remove loopholes. Restrict ATV access where there is trail damage
Do Not Change Standard	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Special needs users benefit from this standard. Timeline is appropriate.
Eliminate Standard	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> People take advantage of it to create undesignated trails. Users partake in ATV hunting. There is no enforcement. Hunters must take responsibility for their actions. No other forests have this standard.
General Comments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local Colorado Parks and Wildlife staff supports this because it prevents meat loss. Senior citizens should travel with other people who can retrieve their game for them without use of ATVs. Over-snow vehicle rules need to be changed. Encourage hunters to rent horses. Special interest groups should not be the reason behind this standard.

RECREATION IN SPECIFIC AREAS OF THE FOREST

Attendees participated in a map-based discussion to denote areas where recreation is going well, areas of emerging or potential concern, and areas of current concern.

-GREEN -	
Areas with good conditions that should be maintained	
Trail conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Windy Point non-motorized closure is good and important for Chili Ski Classic. Rough Creek Falls Trail condition has improved and is well marked.
Additional Areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Corridor away from population centers between Conejos and Alamosa Canyon is in good current and historic condition. Conejos Canyon is popular due to biodiversity and may warrant a special designation in the future. New bridge across the Conejos River near Elk Creek is good. Conejos Peak District's pristine and undiscovered character must be maintained.
-ORANGE-	
Areas of emerging/possible future concerns, or areas with potential for expansion/enhancement	
Recreation Areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Scenery associated with Cumbres – Toltec Railroad must be maintained. Continental Divide National Scenic Trail (CDNST) trails must be maintained. Biodiversity in Conejos Canyon should be protected from human impact with a special designation. Cross-country skiing above CDNST trailhead is negatively impacted by snowmobile use.
-PINK -	
Areas with current concerns	
Trail/Road Conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Trails around intersection of Bear Creek and Conejos River are blocked by private development and need better accessibility, marking, and maintenance. Archuleta Trail is in poor condition and is braided.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Como Lake Road has evident resource damage. • No Name Lake recreation areas needs trail signage, especially at trailhead. • Dipping Lakes from Red Lake needs better maintenance at higher elevations. • Forest Service Road 250 Conejos Canyon needs non-motorized winter access. • Elk Creek Road needs more backcountry motorized access.
Overused Areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • West Fork of Chama needs restricted ATV access. • Road to Elk Creek needs better maintenance due to high summer usage. • Confluence of East and West Forks of Chama Creek is a funnel and exhibits visible impacts from overuse during hunting season.
Additional Areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • River Springs has increased bear conflicts. • Forest Service Road 250 has issues with high speeds of motorized vehicles. • Over-snow vehicle rules, winter travel management, and signage need to be addressed at Wolf Creek Ski Area. • Summer yurt use is desired. • Red Lakes and border of South San Juan Wilderness have many dead trees.

Questions

- *Who advertises the opportunity to run concessionaire operations to locals?*
The Rio Grande National Forest posts the prospectus on the forest website. It is also posted on the Federal Business Opportunities website.
- *How will USFS ensure sustainability of logging after dead trees are gone?*
The Rio Grande National Forest will have to reduce the amount of annual cut trees, as most of the commercial timber cutting occurs in the spruce-fur zone.